

Survival of the fittest

by ROBERT DE ANDREIS

Last Saturday afternoon I had a wonderful day. The talk I had planned a month ago couldn't have gone better. As I stood on that stage and a full house warmly welcomed me, I looked around at the new faces and realized something significant. The seats were filled with readers I've come to recognize from previous talks, people I've met throughout my stint as a columnist and the few wonderful helpers lending their hands and support, and all of them were people I've only met within the year. There were no old friends or acquaintances, family or ghosts from my past, only new people who know the Robert with AIDS, the Robert who is ill, and the Robert who can write absolutely fabulously at times.

The point of all this is that, under the duress of impending death from a succession of debilitating, near-fatal infections, I rebuilt my life from scratch, making it better than it ever was before, and gave life to my own writer's voice.

Civic treasure Peter Mintun, a brilliant pianist, came up to me after the talk to have me sign my book. I was nervous and trembling slightly to see him again, and I saw that he was slightly nervous, himself. I met Peter a few times in the '80s because he was very dear friends with Pepe and Dexter. Pepe was a waiter at L'Etoile where Peter played magic every night in the cocktail lounge. I was startled that he had been reading my column and that he even remembered me.

You see, throughout most of the '80s, I was always the pretty boy in the corner with the good hair, and no one ever knew I had anything intelligent to say. That's how Peter vaguely remembers me, I'm sure. Today, I'm the sickly boy on stage with the bad hair, and people sit on the edge of their seats listening to me. This community rarely takes attractive people seriously, so I had to go out there and contract AIDS on purpose and wait 'til my looks hit the floor in order to finally be heard! It was a lot of work getting that virus in my system, but all that hard work finally paid off!

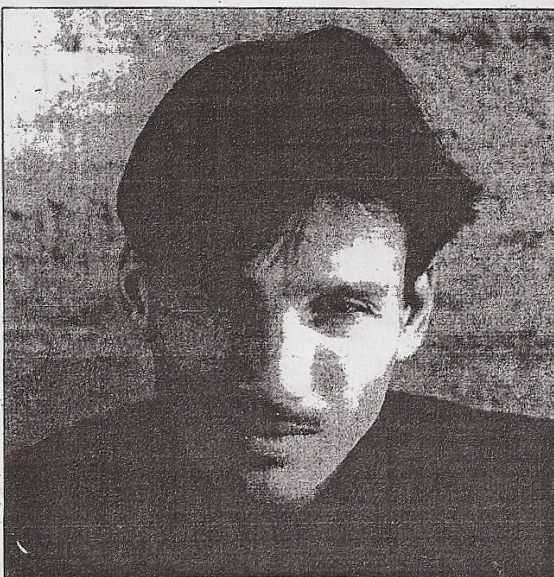
The secret of dealing with AIDS is that you have to constantly reinvent yourself. I am so grateful for all my new friends and readers that know me and support me as Robert with AIDS. In fact, it's my new friends who

have AIDS or are HIV-positive that I learn the most from. Yes, old friends die off and their deaths bring added waves of isolation, but you simply have to get out there and let new people in. Meeting new people has always been difficult for me. I've made the effort this year and it paid off in a big way. Today I feel most at ease with my friends who have AIDS — we speak the same language, have the same fears and can exchange useful coping skills, not to mention the occasional thermos of homemade soup.

Reinventing your life also means being ruthless about getting rid of people and situations that are unhealthy. I routinely screen my calls now, and that simple gesture has eliminated many problematic calls already. If you aren't sick, stay that way as long as possible by eliminating even the smallest amount of stress. Remember, all it takes is one little bee in your bonnet to ruin your whole day.

Another survival skill is to totally respect yourself and your illness, honor it as something sacred and don't let anyone's ignorance or disrespect infringe on your ability to maintain dignity until the end. Get sick and die with dignity, integrity and some good old fashioned nitty gritty — you'll have my thumbs up. Also, you can survive AIDS and still die from it if you hold on to your personal integrity throughout, like my recently deceased friend Dexter who survived AIDS — he no longer has it, does he? Survival is an attitude that endures beyond death.

Those wonderful people who showed up at the talk I



Columnist Robert De Andreis

gave were in on another little secret. I am not the out-of-control madman, the zany, madcap, angry, fire-breathing bastard I pretend to be some days — call it my writer's drag. In real life, I am measured, real and accessible: I would be dead by now if I was as volatile as I seem some days. I allow myself to get all fired up because it takes a lot these days to get people's attention about this life and death subject. I screech some weeks because spokespeople for silent majorities need to kick and

scream loudly because they speak for a lot of people who can't speak for themselves.

The problem with AIDS work is that the people who are most qualified to share experimental hands-on coping skills die off and their truths are lost with them. I have covered a full range of ideas, coping questions, dialogues with doctors, discussions with family about critical issues, preparation for final stages, daily life with illness, hopes, dreams, short-term goals, opportunities for spiritual growth,

you name it, I've covered it. Is all this going to be relearned too when I die? I've looked in the wings and there's no one waiting — maybe they're wisely hiding from me!

Can't some AIDS organization, instead of printing out another resource manual or a nutritional HIV cookbook or a catalogue on the latest drug trials — can't someone steal some of my work and publish it into some practical coping handbook? Rip me off, don't give

me credit, I don't care, I don't even care about money at this point. I would just hate for all the work I've done these past two years to be lost when I die, and why should it sit in some dusty archives for a hundred years when it has contemporary value NOW? Use me, steal from me, infringe my copyright, rip me off, reproduce me without permission — just don't shelve me when I've gone.

Write me: Robert De Andreis, 22 Clifford Terrace, #4, San Francisco, CA 97117.